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SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA SEEKS AIRCRAFT TO LAUNCH NATIONAL
AIRLINE

1.(U) SUMMARY: President Jammeh directs Finance Minister Bala Gaye to contact US Embassy to assist with the purchase of aircraft for the Gambia International Airlines to launch flights to Europe and the US.

2.(U) In a hastily called meeting, Secretary of State (Minister) for Finance Musa Bala Gaye made a strong plea to Ambassador for Embassy assistance in obtaining information on the purchase of aircraft for Gambia International Airlines to commence overseas operations. Gaye reported that in Cabinet meeting the previous day, President Jammeh stated he was "tired of dealing with middlemen" and directed the finance minister to seek assistance from the Embassy as it was time Gambia International Airlines (GIA) had its own planes. He indicated that this would facilitate investment and tourism. Gaye said his reclama to the president that he knew nothing about buying aircraft was dismissed. Jammeh reportedly said he had no confidence in the Gambia Civil Aviation Authority (GCAA) and directed Gaye to proceed immediately.

3.(U) Gaye reported that Jammeh said he wanted GIA to have direct flights to London and the US from Banjul. He further said he wanted to commence flights within the region. Gaye said that Jammeh specifically identified his desire to acquire a Boeing 737-300, a Boeing 737-400 and a 75 passenger Dash 8. These would be used for overseas and West Africa regional routes to be developed. He further indicated specifically they did not want wet leasing, but instead wanted The Gambia to own the equipment. Ambassador asked if The Gambia had trained crew to operate the aircraft since they did not want the wet lease arrangement. He replied that they would plan to hire experienced foreign pilots and felt this would not be difficult as former military and commercial pilots were readily available. Gaye reported that he had conversations with the management of Air Rep Ground services here in The Gambia who indicated they were prepared to provide all essential ground services required for these plans.

4.(U) Ambassador asked if The Gambia had considered approaching airlines flying these routes out of Dakar to divert one plane a week to Banjul for overseas direct flights as a test of the viability of the route. Gaye said it was a good idea, but they did not know appropriate points of contact with Delta or South Africa Airlines for this purpose.

5.(U) Gaye indicated he would be in Washington April 20-28 for IMF/WB meetings and asked if Embassy could facilitate meetings with the EX-IM Bank to discuss loans for the aircraft purchase and with companies with planes to sell. (comment: EX-IM Bank has a master guarantee agreement with Trust Bank Limited which was signed in September 2004. This provides a loan facility at Trust Bank that Gambian businesses can access at US interest rates.)

6.(U) COMMENT: GIA has been a paper airline for a number of years. Operations have been limited to primarily providing flights to Mecca for the Hajj through wet lease arrangements. Jammeh's assignment of Bala Gaye to this project is curious,

as transportation - including aviation - is part of the Minister of Works portfolio. Jammeh's dissatisfaction with GCAA (which falls under Works) was made clear with the announcement the following day of the firings of the Managing Director and Director of Finance of GCAA. Named Acting MD is Paul Bass, a well-respected former GCAA head who was involved in assisting The Gambia in pursuing Category One certification with the FAA. Several local business people have been in contact with the embassy over the last several months seeking information on purchasing commercial aircraft for delivery in The Gambia; these may be the "middlemen" to which Jammeh refers. Embassy will assist in identifying contacts for Gaye.

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